

Croton Inherits A Boat Building Empire

Many towns along the Hudson River in the 1800's had their own boat building companies. Our neighbors on both sides, north and south, had thriving boat building businesses. To the south at Sing Sing (Ossining), Thomas Collyer had an established company and to the north, in Peekskill, William R. Osborn started his Osborn Boat Works. Croton didn't have a boat builder of its own at that time, but that changed in 1902 when the Osborn Boat Works moved down river. No one bore a higher reputation as a builder of steam and sail launches, sloops, sail yachts and rowboats than William R. Osborn, proprietor of the Osborn Boat Works. Boats built under the Osborn name were sought after because of his reputation.



Osborn's Boat Yards in Peekskill

The *Zephyr* was one. She was a very large 155 foot excursion boat which held 550 passengers and traveled the Hudson up and down to New York Harbor. One such excursion was in the year of the Hudson Fulton Celebration, 1909.

The *Zephyr* would pick up passengers along the river towns and treat them to a picturesque steamboat outing on the Hudson River. On September 25th the lucky passengers viewed a close up of the International Fleet as it lay in New York Harbor.

The Hudson Fulton Celebration started as a two-part idea, the first half was to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the third, and most famous, of Henry Hudson's historic voyages in 1609, up the river that bears his name. The second was to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the practical application of steam navigation by Robert Fulton, along with his famous boat, the *Clermont*—which non-believers of steam called *Fulton's Folly*. Many friendly nations were invited to participate in the celebration, and there was an unusual array of strange-looking ships anchored in New York Harbor. What a thrill for the passengers on the *Zephyr*, what stories they could tell their families when they

arrived back at their home ports. The Hudson Fulton Celebration lasted until October 9, 1909.

Some of Osborn's boats were purchased by foreign countries—Cuba for one, plus some South and Central American governments. Others were bought by states that wanted large lake vessels, and then there were those commissioned by the United States Navy. When the Nikko Inn was a popular eating establishment in Croton, Mr. Osborn built a 30-foot gondola that cruised the Croton River.

The *Shady Side* was purchased on February 19, 1918 by the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland. She was a coastal freight and passenger ship built in 1913, probably at the Croton yards. Her name was changed from *Shady Side*, and she was given the number SP-2079. She continued on duty for several years until she was damaged in a storm, developed leaks, and sank early in the morning of March 15, 1925. SP-2079 was raised on the 17th of March but was declared unfit on May 9, probably the same year. The former *Shady Side* was sold at auction on September 24 to William Mattson of Baltimore, Maryland.

The *Mohican*, constructed in 1905, was built in sections. She traveled by flat bed train to Cooperstown and was reassembled on site. Her final destination was Otsego Lake where she was used as an excursion boat. The *Mohican* was an 85 foot double-deck steamboat with a 30 foot beam. She held 325 passengers. The steamer was constructed of white oak, cypress, chestnut and hard pine making her a seaworthy and exceptionally comfortable boat for pleasure trips.

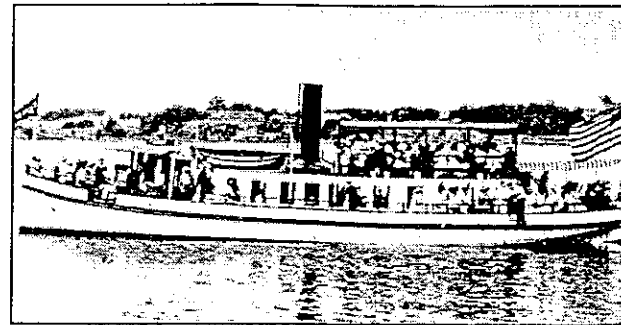


The 'Mohican'

The *Mohican* carried its own water system and a complete electric plant. New large easy chairs graced her decks and all the woodwork gleamed with paint and varnish—

all for the comfort of the passengers. What a sight to behold she must have been, steaming on the lake.

Sightseers on the *Mohican* had the opportunity to view much of the interesting scenery around Otsego Lake. It could have taken them back to the writings of James Fenimore Cooper. Lovers of nature delighted in the ever-changing panoramic views of the crystal clear water and low wooded hills visible from her decks. They were never disappointed and most all enjoyed the two-hour water trip, free from the confusion of daily life. The *Mohican* was still running in 1930.



The 'Frolic'

Another famous Osborn boat was the *Frolic*. She was sister to three other *Frolics* built by Croton carpenters. One *Frolic* was put into service and was sent to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, for use at the naval station. The last *Frolic* was built for Edward B. Osborn, William R. Osborn's son. He used it for taking small excursion parties out on the Hudson. She was 75 feet in length and 26 feet at her beam. Leaving Croton one morning in May, she made her maiden voyage at an early hour, sailing her way down the river, stopping here and there, boarding a party of merry travelers and sightseeing passengers at Brooklyn. Traveling back up the river to Stony Point, the *Frolic* tied up for several hours so that passengers could leave the boat for a walk and enjoy a picnic lunch.

Edward B. Osborn was well qualified to be the captain of his own vessel. He had earned his Master's Papers and had vast experience traveling on the Hudson River. He ran a ferry service for several years to and from Iona Island (down from Bear Mountain) that was a playground in the early 1900's for picnickers and travelers who wanted some river experience.

To build a boat like the *Frolic* usually took three to six months of steady work. At times the yard could have had as many as 80 men doing all kinds of jobs. Imagine how busy the yards must have been, with carpenters cutting and framing hatchways, railings and deck planks and all the odd jobs of boat construction. Imagine caulkers filling the seams with oakum to make the hull

water-tight, and steam engines settled down into their spot below deck. There were possibly some riggers and sail makers who must have had a space of their own to lay out their "sheets" for cutting and fastening. With all these workers adding their specialty into what was truly a work of art, it must have been an exciting time watching a boat slowly take shape, where the smell of sawdust and varnish would permeate the air.

When the big day arrived and the boat was finished, the launching would take place. Each workman, knowing he had done his best, stood by and watched as if it was his own personal accomplishment. Only when she slipped into the water did they know she could make it on her own and a loud cheer would go up. As if by some unwritten law, each workman would smile and then go back to his job, perhaps to the start of another *Frolic* or *Mohican*.

The names of some of the local men who worked on these boats were Jake Peterson, Dan Lounsbury, Dan Hogan, Fred Schleting, Jim Haidan, George Kettering, William Schnell and Frank Finnerty.

These are a few stories of the major boats—too important to forget—that were built at Osborn's. The many smaller ones are too numerous to mention.

While the stories of the boats are interesting, the story of the man who started the company is equally fascinating, for William R. Osborn grew up as a third generation member of a boat-building family. Though he had considerable experience, he was bound over as an apprentice, some stories say "for a dollar a week."

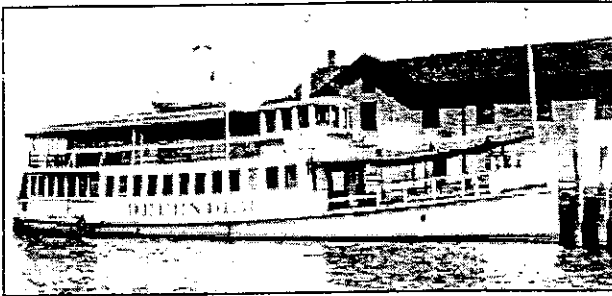
He learned his trade in New York City as a young man. It's possible he may have been apprenticed and become indentured under the master craftsman for one of the "big three" shipbuilders at the time in New York. They were Henry Eckford, Christian Berg and the brothers Adam and Noah Brown. All three were in competition on the East River in the 1800's.

To become indentured was a very serious business. Indenture papers generally stated that during all the time of indentureship, the apprentice promised to serve his master faithfully and that his lawful commands would be readily obeyed. In the language of the day, he was to do no damages to his master, nor to see it done by others without telling or giving notice to his master; he was not to waste his master's goods, nor lend them unlawfully to anyone. The apprentice would not be able to get married, gamble, frequent ale houses or taverns, dance halls or play houses, but behave himself as a faithful apprentice ought to do during his term. After signing his papers, the master would instruct the apprentice in the trade of a ship's carpenter. There terms could easily be changed so that they suited the employer and his moral convictions. The National Apprenticeship Act was passed in 1937 which protected

apprentices.

The usual pay at the time would have been around \$2.50 a week for every week served. The apprentice was expected to furnish his own "food, drink and lodgings and any of the necessities he might encounter." In addition to the weekly sum there might have been a bonus to those apprentices who showed the most promise. During his long apprenticeship of about three years, Osborn learned his trade well and became a skilled shipwright.

William R. still wasn't ready to start his own business, and felt he should work for a boat builder after his apprenticeship was fulfilled in order to gain the confidence he needed to begin his career—one that would earn him a well-respected reputation.



The 'Defender'

In 1857 he established the Osborn Boat Works. It was situated on the Hudson River front in Depot Square, Peekskill, New York. By this time William R. Osborn had over 30 years experience in the mastery of ship building.

He employed, on average, 10 expert carpenters, but as his business grew it could support as many as 35 or even more skilled workmen to fulfill the orders that arrived weekly. He had at his command every facility for producing the finest workmanship of his time. His well-equipped workshops were fitted with the most approved, advanced machinery, including a ten horsepower engine, that was used for both small and large jobs. The materials in his boats were of the finest quality and were obtained from only the most reliable sources. His guarantee was to fill orders with his personal warranty. William R.'s trade was large and first class, and orders could be taken by mail, telegraph or telephone.

At some point William R. Osborn decided to take a partner and he associated himself with a Mr. Driscoll. The firm's name changed to Osborn and Driscoll and remained so for almost nine years. However, after that period, he severed himself from Driscoll and the company reverted to the Osborn Boat Works.

It was probably at this time that William decided to leave Peekskill and move his family and business to Croton—and Croton was ready to receive the Osborn

family and the Osborn Boat Works. He bought property at the foot of Grand Street—what is now Senasqua Park. He went to work constructing large covered sheds to protect the workmen and the boats in the process of being built from exposure to the weather. There would be large pits in the sheds which two men could stand astride the logs that needed to be ripped for planking. By this time the use of power equipment was not unusual, although there were times when hand-cutting was still very important and necessary. Always expanding his operations, Osborn began to include tug boats in his inventory.

Three openings in the sheds across from the railroad tracks were available for the materials, that were not shipped on the river, to arrive by train. One was at the bottom of Grand Street, the next at the foot of Brook Street, and the other was south of the 1912 tunnel, at the base of Maple Street and Route 129.

On Washington's Birthday, in February 1905, the Osborn Boat Works caught fire, the probable cause being the highly combustible sawdust and vapor fumes. It created a fire so hot it actually melted the windows of some houses on Riverside. People were concerned; the glow in the night sky caused by the flames was like the setting sun. Fortunately for the Osborn family, firemen from the Washington Engine Company were having a dance that night and were able to respond to the call quickly. It had been an extremely cold February, and the ice on the river was thick and close to the shore. The firemen tried to chop holes in the ice so they could use their hand pumps to extinguish the flames. Most of the "sheds" were burnt to the ground. Unyielding, the family started to rebuild.

William R. Osborn died on May 10th, 1913. He was eighty years, six months and seven days old. He had been born at Stony Point, New York in 1833. He was survived by his wife Hannah (Benson) and four children. William's death was almost an end of an era of private boat building for the Osborn family—the sons, Edward and Charles, however, would assume their roles and carry on for a while.

Edward B. Osborn died Monday, the 5th of February, 1917 at his home in the village—four years after his father. He was fifty-six years old and had been in failing health for some time, but serious symptoms only developed shortly before his death. He had been born in 1861, was educated in Peekskill and started his early career in boat building working for his well-known father. In addition to running a small boat to Iona Island, he ran a small fleet of fishing boats that sold their catches of shad to the markets in New York City. Shad was always in demand, if not for the fish itself, then for the roe. He became a partner with his father and, when they moved to Croton Edward became the practical head of the company. As soon as he

became a resident of Croton, he began to take an active part in village affairs. He was a village trustee for two years and a member of the Board of Education for three years. He was an ardent Republican and in 1913 was elected to fill a short term as assessor of the Town of Cortlandt, for the lower end of the town. In 1915 he was elected for a full term of four years. He was a member of various clubs and was also a member of the Washington Engine Company.

Charles lived most of his life in Croton; he was co-owner of the Osborn Boat Works. He and Edward ran the company together until Edward's death. Charles carried on for a while, but the end of the company was slowly approaching. The age of steam boating was slowly coming to an end. The fast pace of changing times and railroads were closing in on the steamboat builders of the Hudson River.

Charles was suddenly taken by a heart attack at the Masonic Home where he was staying in Utica, New York on December 30, 1944. He was seventy-eight years old. For 12 years he had been the steward for the Shattermuc Yacht Club in Ossining. He had also been a member of the Independent Order of Redmen, The Odd Fellows and the Masons.

It was almost 400 years since the Dutch "sloeps"

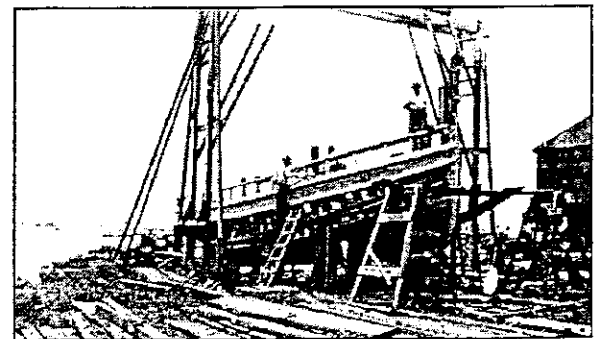
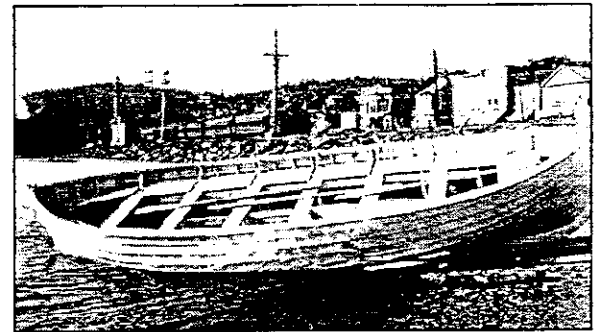
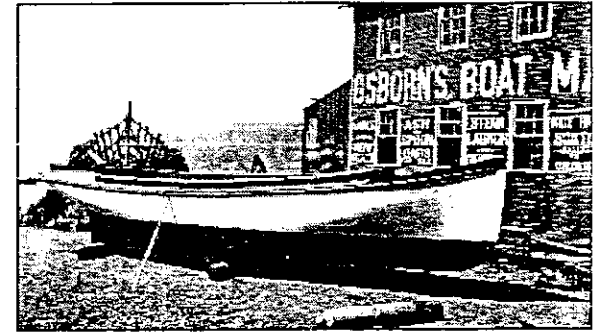


After the fire

started the frantic race to control shipping on the Hudson until the end of the steamer trade. The railroads took over the traffic of transportation of goods and passengers along the shores of the mighty Hudson River. And so, the story of "Croton Inherits a Boat Building Empire" came to an end with the death of Charles Osborn.

The many boats built by the Osborns gave Croton a special significance. Though only photographs remain, they assure us that it was an important piece of Croton's history. The pictures inspire a sense of wonder—and the wish that the boat works were still on the river today, building those fascinating steam and sail vessels.

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**by Joyce Finnerty
for the
Croton Historical Society**